

## What I learned in Germany and Armenia about heritage and beyond

Considering my professional interests as an architect, volunteering projects were a perfect opportunity to visit unique heritage sites not only as a tourist. My take-away after participating in four different projects was that heritage professionals must be open to collaborating with and acquiring knowledge from other disciplines in order to deal with its complexity.

One of my first projects was in Weimar, a cultural centre of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The hands-on work took place at Belvedere Castle complex, a part of the World Heritage site “Classical Weimar”. Under the supervision of the head gardener, we uncovered parts of historic paths according to the original plans. Before this experience, I didn’t know much about parks and gardens, or how they were planned and managed. Due to my educational background in architecture, the focus of my interest and knowledge was more on the style of buildings and their construction system. However, after two weeks on site, with guided tours through different parts of the park and daily exchange with professionals in charge of conservation and maintenance of the complex, I learned so much beyond my field of knowledge – how the planners in the past shaped natural elements following the philosophy of the period, as well as what can be done today to preserve these values.

And it was not only about learning from the gardeners. The group of volunteers was quite diverse. We had interesting discussions inspired by our tasks and the picturesque places where we were visiting. I loved the explanation made by a student of botany about the characteristics and uses of plants we could see in the park, while a historian shared some anecdotes related to the history of the place. Indeed, working on a heritage site was a perfect frame for interdisciplinary exchange and tackling different topics.

My desire for new exchanges led me to cemeteries, where the task was documentation – a Jewish one in Germany, and a Christian one in Armenia. As an architect, I was experienced in mapping the area and positioning elements in space, so that’s how I could contribute, while for the descriptive and interpretative parts of the work, the knowledge of anthropologists and historians was crucial. Every skill was valuable, so finally these interdisciplinary collaborations resulted in mapping two different cemeteries and documenting and describing more than 300 gravestones.

During the documentation of the Jewish cemetery, there was even an additional collaboration. Experts from a university came to test scanning technology on the surface of the stone in order to enable better reading of damaged parts

and collect more information. It is amazing how digital technologies can help save the inscriptions of centuries-old gravestones and give us new material to study. I imagined all the secrets that could be discovered!

In the end, every time I stood in front of the finished project, I was amazed by the results – how we have achieved them combining our knowledge and new lessons learned. Volunteering projects have really shown how working for heritage requires collaboration and how interesting it is to learn from each other. Ultimately it is what heritage is about – exchange and bringing people together.

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